

E-learning: Is This Teaching at Students or Teaching With Students?

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The development of e-learning as a teaching strategy in higher education has implications relating to student learning, the role of the teacher, and the institution of higher education. This paper debates the andragogical and pedagogical theories that support the development of e-learning to date. Leading to a discussion on how the process of e-learning may be contributing to the "stamp-me-smart" culture and restricting the development of critical thinking within student nurses. Concluding that e-learning has a top-down institution-led development that is contrary to the student-led development espoused by universities.

Search terms: Nurse, education, e-learning, androgogy, pedagogy

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Introduction

The use of technology-dependent communication in higher education for teaching and learning is increasing across all faculties, colleges, and universities. The motivations for the development of this style of teaching and learning are varied. Increasing accessibility, institutional needs, economic drive, and rationalization of teaching are all cited as drivers for this increasing use of technology in teaching (Oliver, 2005). Higher education is empirically based with established theories of teaching and learning (Williams, 2002). An area of research that is conspicuous by its absence are the theories that support the teaching and learning used and developed in conjunction with e-learning in higher education (Williams). The concern that I am raising is that a now well-established teaching style utilizing e-learning is being developed and used worldwide with little research to support the andragogy/pedagogy of the teaching and learning.

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The Andragogy/Pedagogy Debate

There is a well-established debate on the theory supporting teaching and learning in higher education. Is it pedagogy or andragogy? The discourse around the terms pedagogy and andragogy is not semantics but the recognition that teaching and learning in higher education relies on different theories and philosophies in its development. Pedagogy is the term that is most frequently and loosely used in the literature to define the theories of teaching and learning in higher education. Definitions of pedagogy range from "child leading" to "teacher centered," terms that are the antithesis of adult and higher education (Answers, 2006). The use of the term pedagogy does not credit the inherent differences in the development and practices that are used in teaching and learning in higher education. The author considers the use of pedagogy in any discussion about teaching and learning in higher education as redundant and the term to be used is andragogy. Knowles and Associates (1984) postulate four concepts that define andragogy from pedagogy: (a) adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, (b) adult experiences provide the basis for learning activities, (c) adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life, and finally (d) adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-orientated (Northeastern Illinois University, 2006). A

discourse relating to these four areas of andragogical teaching will now be applied and discussed in relation to the development of e-learning in nursing and higher education.

E-learning Development to Date

Have these theories that relate to adult education in any way influenced or correlate with the development of e-learning in teaching and learning? The andragogy column in Table 1 lists many of the terms associated with the theories and the development of the teaching and learning in higher education (Knowles and Associates, 1984). The column titled e-learning lists many of the terms used in the literature to define and describe the development of e-learning.

This table displays graphically the differences in the terms used in the literature to describe the theories of andragogical adult education and e-learning. The wording and phrasing supporting e-learning relies heavily on the terminology of pedagogy. What is the teaching and learning theory that supports the continuing unabated development of e-learning in higher education? In this new millennium, with the race to use modern technology, are we dismissing decades of research and evidence and relying on inappropriate teaching theories to develop e-learning in higher education?

Table 1. Terms Used in the Literature

Andragogy	E-learning
Nonprescriptive	Prescriptive
Issue centered	Knowledge centered
Problem posing and knowledge creation	Didactic goal-driven outcome
Continuous negotiation	Postnegotiation
Shared individual and group responsibility for learning	Very little group assessment
Mutual respect and equality	Submissive role of learner
Integrated thinking and learning	Asynchronous nature of e-learning
Develop participation	Top-down development

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Literature Search

Establishing the empirical data that support the andragogy/pedagogy of e-learning in higher education involved an extensive literature search. Using established databases and search engines Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (2006) and Ingenta (2006) and university library catalogues containing journals and literature on the subject of education, a literature search was commenced. Keywords used in the search were "pedagogy," "andragogy," "higher education," and "e-learning." Boolean operatives and truncation were used to broaden the search. No limitations was placed on the search. A wide variety and significant amount of literature has been produced on the subject of e-learning in higher education. The literature identified themes in the development of e-learning, such as participation, access, and frameworks of e-learning. Significantly, the search produced a dearth of literature on the andragogy/pedagogy supporting the development of e-learning in higher education. This has required me to rely on "old" or "seminal" literature on the subject of andragogy and pedagogy. The literature identified will now be discussed in relation to the main themes that are recognized to constitute good practice in andragogy when developing teaching and learning in higher education.

Teaching at the Student or Teaching With the Students

Adult learners are self-directed and motivated to learn and require to be involved in the process and development of their education (Brookfield, 1993; Milligan, 1995). Darbyshire (1993) counterargues that not all adult learners are self-directed but rather use different strategies and have different motivations to learn. Does e-learning offer students a variety of strategies for learning and involvement in the development of their education? The planning, evaluation, and development of e-learning appears to be top-down, controlled by educator, and relies solely on

directed study (Fox & MacKeogh, 2003; Milligan, 1995; Salmon, 2005). The literature supports a style of education that remains in the complete control of the educator and not able to address the needs of the students it serves (Milligan). This didactic style of teaching clearly falls into the domain of pedagogy. Freire's apocryphal discussion on banking in nurse education in the 1980s identifies the pedagogy of teachers depositing information in students, therefore, promoting adaptation not transformation. The method of placing all the information for a course online for students to read and then pass an online assessment reinforces Freire's concerns about the pedagogy of nurse education and now e-learning (Freire, 1987). This recognized structural development for successful e-learning further reinforces the strict top down development (Ham & Davey, 2005; Salmon, 2005). With a program of strict learning, how in nursing profession does this recognize the experience and opportunity for students to contribute their learned experiences to education?

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Knowles and Associates (1984) suggest that adult experiences provide the basis for learning activities. Darbyshire (1993) merely talks about the experience of transition from school education into higher education, and does not discuss the work/life experience that Knowles was proposing. Although Darbyshire's point is an important one, very few schools use e-learning as a regular method of teaching at present (Beastall, 2006). This, however, does raise the issue of developing a course that is predominantly e-learning; for first year higher education this would be an "experience" for students.

The experience of students transferring straight from school, where they are used to multifaceted teaching in the classroom with its atmosphere and use of artifacts, to the mono-environment of e-learning may also be an experience they would not be familiar with (Ching, Levin, & Parisi, 2004; Lazzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). E-learning does offer an opportunity for students to participate and contribute to the teaching and learning with their experiences by using discussion boards. Discussion boards would appear to be an ideal tool that could be used by learners to discuss with the teacher and colleagues their experiences. Unfortunately, to encourage participation in discussion boards, many courses have had to attach a compulsory participation or summative assessment to stimulate discussion (Salmon, 2005). The reasons cited for this reticence of use have been the poor support and the asynchronous response, which all contributes to a psychological gap (Lazzio et al.; Salmon; Sunderland, 2002). This forced method of participation only contributes to confirm the didactic, educator-led development of e-learning.

Linked to the adult experience is the relevance of the material that is used for teaching and learning. Knowles and Associates (1984) postulate that adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life. This is an aspect of e-learning that in part is the greatest failing of computer-assisted communication in teaching. Being a good teacher adds credit to academic courses. This can be easily identified within a classroom but is more difficult to assess virtually (Ham & Davey, 2005; Lazzio et al., 2002). Students will have to be aware of the course leaders' and associated academic staff's names and e-mails for contact details but may never meet them. To enhance the teaching and learning of nursing students, the use of socialization and narrative are seen as necessary skills of the lecturer (Kenny, Pontin, & Moore, 2004). Important teaching techniques like using narrative to highlight an important point or contextualize a situation does not transfer well to the medium of e-learning (Milligan, 1997). To try and develop discussion using narrative "carefully scripted scenarios" are reg-

ularly used in e-learning (Fox & MacKeogh, 2003). The scenarios are so carefully scripted that they end up as cliché or bear little resemblance to practice. To try and involve all students in the discussion involves returning to the debate about the issue of discussion boards and compulsory participation. The use of narrative also provides a knowledgeable and real-life feel to teaching, which can then be reciprocated by the students developing debate and true exchange of knowledge (Creedy & Hand, 1994). This andragogical strategy cannot be transferred to e-learning for reasons such as asynchronous dialogue and geography (Sunderland, 2002) on different levels. First, students are not in the same room as the teacher and, second, one of the reasons for developing e-learning is the financial imperative that a course could be developed centrally and accessed by any student worldwide (Kenny & Kendall, 2001). Narrative then becomes global, requiring those "carefully scripted scenarios," which lose their benefit of use in teaching and learning. What is relevant practice in Dundee may not always be relevant practice in Dubai. Salmon (2005) describes how scenario use can be achieved in an e-learning environment by good online support. Salmon describes how this can be achieved using pedagogical theory, further reinforcing the use of pedagogy as a teaching strategy used in e-learning. What remains is the use of "carefully scripted scenarios" that lead the student down a predetermined path to an online discussion that is compulsory. This prescriptive teaching strategy does not follow the theory of andragogy on any level.

Adult learning is problem-centered and nursing has used this approach to teaching and learning for many years (Knowles and Associates, 1984; Milligan, 1999). Problem-centered education aims, through the setting of problems, to enable the student to identify gaps in knowledge, independently fill in these gaps, and to use this model as a life long learning in practice (Milligan, 1999). E-learning with directed reading lists, links to further reading, compulsory discussion, and online assessment is a clear case of knowledge acquisition. The use of scenarios to stimulate online discussion tries

to address these issues, but as previously discussed, do not satisfactorily achieve this. The pedagogical development of e-learning may be a constraint of higher education rather than a limitation of computer-assisted communication. This can be seen in the new area of quality assurance in e-learning (Oliver, 2005). The measurements used for ensuring the quality assurance of e-learning are at present poorly defined but do identify the outcome-based nature of its development in phrases and terminology such as "strategic plan," "graduates are employed in various ways," and "graduates can demonstrate outcomes" (Oliver). These terms clearly define a teaching-centered strategy that is focused on leading students through higher education. This overview of the yet undefined theories that support e-learning does throw some bigger questions into the forum for discussion.

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Discussion

"Stamp me smart" is a phrase that is used in the race for the acquisition of qualification in higher

education (Darbyshire, 1993). Is it the customer that is striving for this recognition or is it a feature of the system of higher education? With the number of people who are now encouraged to participate in higher education, is there any other way of being able to educate the masses other than e-learning? Clear outcome measurements are and can be used to justify the quality of the course (Kristensen & Sorensen, 2004). These clear outcomes do not consider the theories or quality of the teaching and learning that is taking place; it measures goals such as "employed in various ways" and "demonstrate outcomes" (Oliver, 2005). With these pressures on higher education, it is quite understandable that they have quickly developed teaching tools that can address the needs of the service. These quality outcomes do not define the type of learner that achieves these outcomes. With a strong pedagogical style, you would anticipate that the learner would follow this style into practice, follow assignments, read prepared literature, comply with adherence to discussion, and complete assessment. The pedagogy of e-learning would prepare nurses excellently for the increasingly bureaucratic protocol-driven health service (Hewitt-Taylor & Melling, 2004). Although this fosters conformity, it does not develop critical thinkers. Has nursing reached a point in its development where the outcome measurement of a qualification defines the quality of the nurse? This is a long debate about the benefits of transferring nursing into higher education and what benefits have been produced for the patient, the professional, or the individual (Pearson, 2005; Smith, 1978). Pedagogy is associated with vocational learning and not higher education (Milligan, 1995). Nursing is continually striving to lose this vocational image and promote the image of the higher-educated professional nurse. I consider that this continuing use of a pedagogical style of teaching reinforces the vocational image of nursing. Does this pedagogical style of teaching prepare today's nurses for practice? Nurses are required by statute to be prepared for practice and has this been achieved through e-learning by increasing the

use of computer technology and completing online assessment (Nursing and Midwifery Council [NMC], 2004). Developing a learner who has been educated to conform to guidelines and policies could be seen as an attribute to the nurse of today (Milligan, 1997). Nursing is not solely ticking boxes and following policies. It is caring for people in a vulnerable position that requires consideration of every action that is undertaken by the nurse (NMC). Nurses therefore have to be adaptable critical thinkers who can assess a situation or individual and respond to them as an individual to provide specific care (Norman et al., 2002; Scottish Executive, 2004). The theories of andragogical teaching promote thinking based on negotiation, respect, creation, responsibility, knowledge, and participation (Milligan, 1997, 1995). Would these skills not better prepare individuals for the challenges that lie ahead in the profession of nursing?

The profession of teaching in higher education has had challenges over the last few years, with the increasing number of students attending and increasing politicizing of higher education (Scottish Executive, 2003). Teaching is seen as a high-quality product that many universities now advertise as advantageous to the experience of higher education. Is this rush into e-learning not only devaluing teaching but, more importantly, devaluing the theories and evidence that support good teaching (Darbyshire, 1993)? Darbyshire in his work almost relishes the notion that as andragogy was accepted 20 years ago and was initially challenged, it was finally discarded. Will this be the same fate for e-learning? After all, what is going to happen when computers become obsolete?

Conclusion

What then has fueled e-learning's meteoric rise to the forefront of higher education? The little literature that does discuss the theories relating to the development of e-learning sheds little light or knowledge on the subject. The debate supporting the development of e-learning has a bias towards the pure theories of

pedagogy, which is substantiated by the terminology used throughout the literature. I believe that the development of e-learning, like the development of all adult and nurse education, would benefit from a mixture of both andragogical and pedagogical theories, to the ultimate benefit of the patient, the nursing profession, and the individual. The qualities and benefits of e-learning to the student are reduced to buzz phrases like "graduates can demonstrate outcomes." The qualities and benefits of e-learning to the staff are reduced to virtual teaching. It appears that the influential drivers in the development of e-learning may have overlooked the pedagogy or andragogy that support this significant shift in teaching and learning in higher education because of the needs of the institution.

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E-learning: Is This Teaching at Students or Teaching With Students?

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